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Lina Mukhopadhyay is Professor in the Department of Training and Development, School of English Language Education, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her areas of expertise are bi/multilingual education, second language acquisition, language assessment, academic writing and use of AI in English Language Education.

linamukhopadhyay@efluniversity.ac.in

Bilingual Picturebooks in Early School Classrooms: A Pedagogical Exploration Through *The Seed/Beej*

Sadaf Shah & Prerna Sharma

Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to reorient early school pedagogy in India towards learner-centred, discussion-based, multilingual, and multimodal approaches to education. This paper argues that bilingual picturebooks constitute a powerful yet underutilised pedagogical resource for realising these aims. Drawing on scholarship in children's literature, bilingual education, multimodality and translanguaging, the study examines how bilingual picturebooks support interpretation through the interaction of visual and verbal modes. By incorporating key theoretical perspectives on bilingualism and translanguaging, the article analyses *The Seed/Beej* (English-Hindi) by Deepa Balsavar and proposes a classroom teaching plan. It demonstrates the way in which bilingual picturebooks can strengthen early literacy practices, promote learner engagement, and support inclusive multilingual pedagogy, while highlighting the crucial role of teachers in mediating these pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Bilingual picturebooks, multimodality, multilingual pedagogy, NEP 2020, translanguaging.

Introduction

Early school classrooms in India face the challenge of supporting the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development of children in response to the rich, multilingual and highly visual environments in today's world. However, conventional classroom practices, often

dominated by text-heavy materials, monolingual instruction, and rote learning, fall short of addressing these developmental needs. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges the need for a pedagogical shift and calls for “more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based” education (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 3). Its strong emphasis on multilingualism, foundational literacy, multimodal learning, and joyful classrooms provides a promising policy environment for integrating bilingual picturebooks into early school classrooms.

Picturebooks have long been recognised as inherently multimodal texts in which meaning emerges through the interaction between words and images that “leave room for the readers/viewers to fill with their previous knowledge, experience, and expectations” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, pp. 1–2). In the process of filling these narrative gaps, young readers learn to actively infer, predict, and construct meaning in ways that strengthen comprehension, vocabulary, and visual literacy. Within this broader context, bilingual picturebooks emerge as an important yet underexplored pedagogical resource in early school classrooms, reflecting NEP 2020’s emphasis on the cognitive benefits of early multilingual exposure and its recommendation of “a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 13). By combining two languages with visual codes, bilingual picturebooks create meaningful, low-anxiety spaces where children can draw upon their existing linguistic repertoires while acquiring new lexical resources, concepts, and interpretive strategies. They further encourage children to integrate prior knowledge not only within a single narrative but across linguistic and visual signs.

This article argues that bilingual picturebooks, through their dual-language format and multimodal design, embody the principles of NEP 2020 and have the potential to transform early language classrooms in India. Through a close reading of *The Seed/Beej* (English–Hindi) by Balsavar (2005) and an examination of its classroom applications, the study highlights the need to rethink conventional classroom practices and systematically integrate bilingual picturebooks into early school pedagogy.

Theoretical Perspectives on Bilingualism and Translanguaging

The fields of bilingualism and translanguaging have evolved from

rigid to more fluid and dynamic models of language. Cummins is a prominent figure in laying the foundation for this transition by examining bilingual education in relation to cognitive development. Through his interdependence hypothesis and Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model, he posited that bilingual individuals draw upon a shared cognitive-linguistic base, enabling the transfer of literacy and conceptual skills developed in one language to another (Cummins, 1979, 1981). Building on this, one of the leading scholars of bilingual education, García (2009), reconceptualised bilingualism as a dynamic and integrated repertoire that allows the use of languages simultaneously, rather than as two separate linguistic systems. She advocated for pedagogies that affirm children's lived bilingualism. In her earlier work, García (1996) recognised both bilingualism and multilingualism as significant for "language majorities and minorities for *cognitive, social, and psychological* reasons" (p. 409).

A turning point came when Welsh educator Cen Williams (1994) coined the Welsh term '*trawsieithu*' to describe the planned alternation between Welsh and English to enhance the competence of bilingual learners in both languages. The term was later translated into English as *translanguaging* by his colleague, Colin Baker (2001). These earlier conceptions, however, were still grounded in the separation of languages as distinct systems. This perspective was subsequently advanced by García and Wei (2014), who emphasised the use of a single and integrated linguistic repertoire among bilingual speakers. Similarly, Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) defined translanguaging as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages" (p. 281). Cenoz (2017), a scholar of multilingualism and translanguaging, further developed this framework through his concept of pedagogical translanguaging, which refers to instructional strategies "planned by the teacher inside the classroom ... based on the use of students' resources from the whole linguistic repertoire" (p. 194). Such approaches support enhanced comprehension, expanded access to information, and the development of metalinguistic awareness through the coordinated use of multiple languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p. 344). Translanguaging in its present form extends beyond strictly linguistic practices to include multimodal forms of meaning-making (Vogel & García, 2017). With increasing globalisation and the growing presence of multilingual

classrooms, translanguaging is now widely recognised as a highly relevant pedagogical practice.

Early Childhood Learning and Bilingual Picturebooks

Early childhood is a critical period for language acquisition and cognitive growth. NEP 2020 notes that “children pick up languages extremely quickly between the ages of 2 and 8 and that multilingualism has great cognitive benefits to young students” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 13). In India, where most children grow up navigating more than one language, bilingual picturebooks naturally resonate with their lived linguistic realities and allow them to build on and extend their existing linguistic repertoires.

The multimodal nature of bilingual picturebooks offers diverse learning opportunities for young learners. Children’s literature critics Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) describe the relationships between words and images in picturebooks as “complementary,” “symmetrical,” or “counterpoint,” each requiring readers to construct understanding through comparison, inference, and synthesis (p. 17). These cognitive processes, central to multimodal literacy, are rarely nurtured through traditional text-centric instructional materials.

Picturebooks invite readers to engage with layers of meaning beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. Nodelman, an influential critic of children’s literature, argues that texts written for children appear simple on the surface, but this “simple text implies an unspoken and much more complex repertoire that amounts to a second, hidden text” (2008, p. 8). This highlights the pedagogical value of picturebooks, as young readers draw upon their experiences, context, and visual cues to interpret meaning beyond what is directly stated. Bilingual picturebooks enhance this process by trusting readers to work across linguistic, visual, and narrative codes, supported by adult guidance wherever necessary. Even emergent readers who cannot fully decode one or both languages can still engage with the narrative through illustrations while using the bilingual text as scaffolding. Bilingual picturebooks, therefore, fill an important pedagogical gap by introducing linguistic complexity without overburdening young learners. They also encourage translanguaging as a natural interpretive process, and expand literary experiences beyond decoding to include deeper interpretation.

The Role of Teachers

The pedagogical impact of bilingual picturebooks depends not only on the texts themselves but, crucially, on the ways teachers mediate children's engagement with them. As Menon et al. (2024) note, "teachers play a crucial role in creating a 'live circuit' between young readers and the text" (p. 321). They caution that merely replacing one type of text with another cannot, by itself, reshape classroom interactions unless there is a corresponding shift in learners' engagement with the text. This brings into focus the importance of preparedness of teachers. Teacher education programmes in India rarely include training in picturebook pedagogy, resulting in limited confidence in facilitating image-text interactions, supporting translanguaging practices, or enabling open-ended discussions led by children. This gap is significant because young children's literary understanding unfolds across multiple modes.

Dyson (1997) demonstrates that young children blend learning with talk, drawing, and dramatic play, particularly through classroom activities like "Author's Theater" that emphasise performance, collaboration, and interpretive discussions, rather than isolated extraction of textual meaning (pp. 2–4). Bilingual picturebooks naturally invite such multimodal responses through their visual richness and linguistic scaffolding. Allowing children to express their understanding in multiple forms and languages becomes especially beneficial for multilingual learners, who may comprehend more than they can yet express in a single language.

An effective early literacy pedagogy relies on sustained dialogue in the classroom. Whether a story is read aloud or independently, classrooms need "spaces where children can talk, question, and respond to literature in varied ways" (Menon et al., 2024, p. 326). The visual richness of bilingual picturebooks enables children to enter stories even when their language proficiency is not fully developed, while bilingual formats offer multiple entry points for readers at different stages of linguistic development. Menon et al. (2024) argue that "it is best to explore literature with children in the language they are most comfortable with, as this keeps the focus on meaning-making" (p. 332). In the context of bilingual texts, this ensures that interpretation and comprehension remain the central focus rather than linguistic correctness.

Meaningful engagement with bilingual picturebooks also depends on cultural resonance. Many Indian bilingual picturebooks depict everyday

scenarios, local environments, and culturally familiar imagery, making them suitable for early school classrooms. Intentional and discussion-based use of these books, carefully planned and mediated by teachers, can support sustained interpretive and linguistic participation. Teachers, therefore, play a central role in balancing language support with literary engagement while cultivating inclusive and culturally grounded classrooms.

Barriers and Constraints to Bilingual Picturebooks in Indian Classrooms

Despite their potential, bilingual picturebooks remain largely absent from Indian classrooms due to structural constraints and pedagogical challenges. NEP 2020 acknowledges that “small school sizes have rendered it economically suboptimal and operationally complex to run good schools ... Teachers often teach multiple grades at a time, and teach multiple subjects, including subjects in which they may have no prior background” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 28). Under such conditions, teachers tend to rely on prescribed textbooks and predictable routines, leaving little scope for incorporating additional or unfamiliar materials such as picturebooks.

Access remains another significant barrier that contributes to the underusage of bilingual picturebooks. While NEP 2020 recommends curricular reform through “the reduction in content and increased flexibility” and emphasises that such shifts should be paralleled by changes in textbooks (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 17), the availability of high-quality bilingual and multimodal reading materials in school libraries remains uneven. Limited funding, inadequate library infrastructure, and the absence of bilingual picturebooks within the formal curriculum further hinder the implementation of this vision.

The misconceptions about picturebooks further contribute to their underutilisation. Many teachers assume that picturebooks are simplistic and may not recognise the depth these texts offer. Additionally, teachers may feel uncertain about facilitating discussions that allow multiple interpretations. This hesitation may result in rapid and uninterrupted read-aloud sessions without pausing for prediction, inference, or exploration, thereby limiting the cognitive and linguistic benefits of picturebooks.

Classroom size also poses a real challenge that shapes the feasibility of picturebook pedagogy. Interactive read-alouds and discussion-based approaches are difficult to sustain in overcrowded classrooms. NEP 2020 recommends reducing class sizes to a pupil-teacher ratio of 30:1 or ideally 25:1 in disadvantaged areas (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 9), but this recommendation has not yet been consistently implemented in practice. Without manageable classroom conditions, the dialogic and collaborative potential of picturebooks is hard to realise.

Ultimately, when children engage deeply with bilingual picturebooks, they become active constructors of meaning as they draw connections across languages, between visual and verbal cues, and between textual events and their own lived experiences. However, such pedagogical possibilities depend on teachers who are confident in learner-centred and inquiry-driven approaches, an aspiration strongly articulated in NEP 2020 but not yet adequately integrated within teacher training.

Using Bilingual Picturebooks: The Case of *The Seed/Beej*

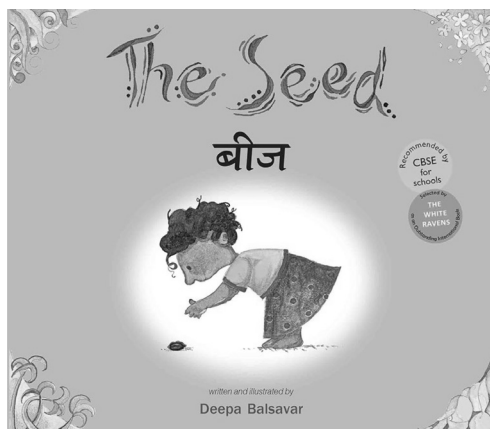
This section presents a teaching plan based on existing research and NEP 2020, while focusing on *The Seed/Beej* (English–Hindi), written and illustrated by Balsavar, to exemplify how bilingual picturebooks can support early literacy, multilingual learning, and multimodal approaches in Indian classrooms. The book is available in multiple Indian language combinations with English as the common language, including English–Hindi, English–Marathi, English–Gujarati, English–Kannada, and English–Telugu, among others, and has been recommended by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) as a supplementary reading text.

The first step is to introduce a contextually relevant book in the classroom that enables the children to relate to its themes and concerns. *The Seed/Beej* becomes suitable for such an introduction because its narrative is accessible to emergent readers, its illustrations provide opportunities for prediction and discussion, and its bilingual format encourages children to move fluidly between languages. In the Indian context, such a text inherently respects the children's linguistic and cultural multiplicity. It also creates opportunities for translanguaging practices by allowing children to read, compare, translate, and discuss across languages, with guidance from the teacher. As Cenoz and Gorter (2022) observe, pedagogical translanguaging involves structured learning tasks that

integrate multiple languages, and by using multilingual learning strategies, aided by the teacher, the “learners can take an active role and be responsible for their own learning when they link prior knowledge to new knowledge” (pp. 346–347).

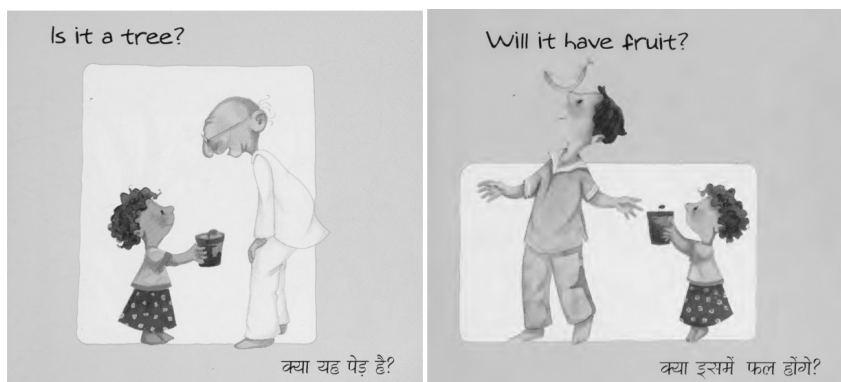
The narrative of *The Seed/Beej* centres on a child who finds a seed, plants it, and wonders what it might grow into. She directs these questions to the adults around her. Each spread of the book, starting with the cover page, presents a short English sentence at the top, followed by its Hindi equivalent below it. The minimal text is mostly framed in the form of questions, such as “Is it a tree?,” “Will it have fruit?,” and “Will it stay small?” This repetitive, inquiry-driven structure of the book resonates with the natural reasoning and prediction patterns associated with childhood. The bilingual layout further supports literacy in both languages, as children notice differences and similarities between scripts, associate words with their meanings, and make connections across languages. The illustrations carry significant narrative weight, enabling children to comprehend the story regardless of their proficiency in either language.

Research highlights the importance of allowing children to explore picturebooks independently before formal instruction, as this browsing helps them make connections that create opportunities for inquiry (Daly et al., 2020, p. 79). Building on this insight, classroom engagement with the selected bilingual picturebook should be structured in ways that resonate with the inquiry-oriented and discussion-based learning advocated by NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 12). Since *The Seed/Beej* targets early school classrooms, the teacher has to activate curiosity and prior knowledge of children before introducing the text. For instance, the teacher may begin by showing a real seed and prompt children to predict what it might become in any language they choose. Allowing translanguaging, that is, mixing Hindi, English, or regional languages in their responses at this stage, creates a psychologically safe environment for children and aligns with NEP 2020’s recommendation to use home languages in early learning to reduce cognitive load (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 13). When the teacher encourages this mixing rather than correcting it, children feel empowered to bring the complete range of their linguistic resources to the discussion, thus promoting translanguaging, while the teacher can simultaneously restructure and expand their responses.

Figure 1: Cover page of 'The Seed/Beej'

Note. From *The Seed/Beej* by D. Balsavar, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Tulika Publishers.

Before reading the book, the teacher may prompt the learners to identify the English and Hindi titles displayed on the cover page (see Figure 1). The teacher can highlight how the same idea is represented in two languages and reinforced by the illustrations. As Nodelman (1992) observes, “As we glance at a book before reading it, the cover is the most significant source of our expectations of it” (p. 134). A discussion about the cover illustration encourages children to predict what the story might be about, setting the stage for deeper engagement.

Figure 2: Examples of the Dialogic Style of 'The Seed/Beej'

Note. From *The Seed/Beej* by D. Balsavar, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Tulika Publishers.

Read-aloud practices play a significant role in mediating children's engagement with bilingual picturebooks, especially when unfamiliar languages are involved. As Daly et al. (2020) note, "Read alouds of bilingual picturebooks offer opportunities for children to learn about the context clues available in the illustrations and text to understand unfamiliar languages" (p. 79). In case of *The Seed/Beej*, conducting the read-aloud dialogically is an effective method, as it mirrors the style and structure of the book. During the read-aloud, the teacher can pause and prompt children to answer the guiding questions on each page (see Figure 2) to encourage predictions, observations, and connections to lived experiences. The bilingual text of the book allows for flexible scaffolding, as children may respond in one language while the teacher rephrases in another. In books with minimal text, such as *The Seed/Beej*, children often rely heavily on the illustrations, examining the illustrated objects to support their predictions. The teacher could also encourage children to analyse the similarities and differences between the two panels in Figure 3, where 3(A) depicts the moments before the seed is planted and 3(B) highlights the moments after it is planted.

Figure 3: Panels to Analyse for Similarities and Differences



Note. From *The Seed/Beej* by D. Balsavar, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Tulika Publishers.

The teacher can, therefore, draw attention to the parallel text layout. Depending on the nature of the classroom, she/he can focus on the more familiar or less familiar language first (Daly et al., 2020, p. 80). The ability of children to recognise text, even partially, helps build

confidence and early literacy awareness. Some children may recognise letters or trace scripts, while others may point out differences. These spontaneous observations provide insight into the way in which bilingual picturebooks offer inclusive entry points for learners at varying levels of literacy development. The narrative's open-ended conclusion, in which the child remains uncertain about what might happen to the seed and concludes with "It doesn't matter!" (see Figure 4), shifts the emphasis from arriving at a correct answer or outcome towards valuing inquiry, curiosity, and process. García (1996) advocates "an inquiry-based approach to learning ... a student-centered and interactive pedagogy, including the use of cooperative learning, whole language strategies, and the writing process" in classroom practice (p. 419). *The Seed/Beej* demonstrates how uncertainty can be made productive rather than constraining.

Figure 4: *Open-ended Last Panel of The Seed/Beej*



Note. From *The Seed/Beej* by D. Balsavar, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Tulika Publishers.

Post-reading, children may be encouraged to engage in a range of creative and experiential tasks. For instance, the teacher can initiate discussions about the open-ended conclusion or revisit the earlier question about what the seed might become. Daly et al. (2020) suggest that "Open-ended invitations and questions allow children to build and create their own inquiries. Teachers need to be careful not to dominate these discussions, but to work and think alongside children" (p. 80). Children could also be encouraged to plant their own seeds and observe changes over time, connecting the book's narrative with

experiential learning. The sequencing of images in the book can help children develop narrative competence. As they gain confidence, they may draw or dramatise the story, or begin to create their own stories, further supporting multimodal expression.

This sample teaching plan, developed through the case of *The Seed/Beej*, illustrates the integration of literacy development with scientific thinking, artistic exploration, and experiential learning in bilingual picturebooks. By foregrounding inquiry, discussion, and multimodal responses, such plans enable teachers to experiment with and innovate their instructional approaches. This pedagogical flexibility corresponds with NEP 2020's emphasis on teacher autonomy "in choosing aspects of pedagogy, so that they may teach in the manner they find most effective for the students in their classrooms" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 21).

The case of *The Seed/Beej* highlights the theoretical alignment of classroom practice with the broader fields of bilingualism, multimodality, and translanguaging. The use of bilingual picturebooks enables learners to mobilise their full linguistic repertoire in fluid and integrated ways, rather than treating languages as separate systems. It also demonstrates the ability of learners to transfer knowledge across languages by building connections through bilingual text and visual elements. Such strategies are highly relevant in the context of NEP 2020, as bilingual picturebooks show how inclusive pedagogies can be effectively implemented in classrooms. Therefore, when thoughtfully planned, these texts can function as catalysts for reimagining early school classrooms and bridge the gap between policy aspirations and pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

Bilingual picturebooks such as *The Seed/Beej* offer an effective pedagogical resource for early school classrooms in India. Their multimodal structure and dual-language format resonate strongly with NEP 2020's vision of multilingual, inquiry-based, and joyful learning. By creating opportunities for prediction, interpretation, questioning, and visual exploration, these texts nurture multiliteracies and enable children to use their entire linguistic repertoires. They promote translanguaging, reduce cognitive load and support inclusive meaning-making practices. However, to realise their full potential, teacher education programmes need to integrate sustained training in picturebook pedagogy,